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FM AMEMBASSY BANJUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7518
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0014
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000251

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DAKAR PLS PASS ODC, DAO, AND RAO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV KMCA EPET GA VE CU

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: PRESIDENT'S TRIP TO VENEZUELA AND CUBA

REF: BANJUL 197 ET AL

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Gambian President Jammeh came away from his recent trip to Venezuela with a grant of \$30 million and an unknown amount of oil-related assistance, according to our source. We are told that Jammeh, in his aid pitch to Venezuelan leader Chavez, claimed that the U.S. had "abandoned" him -- citing our suspension of MCA eligibility -- and pledged to serve as Venezuela's firm ally in Africa. Jammeh's subsequent stopover in Cuba reportedly produced no new agreements, but was designed to convey appreciation for Cuba's long-standing medical assistance. Jammeh's trip to Venezuela, along with his December/January exchange of visits with Iran's Ahmadinejad, underscores the expansion of The Gambia's Venezuelan and Iranian connections since the GOTG-hosted African Union Summit here in July 2006, attended by Chavez and Ahmadinejad. Beyond financial aid and photo ops, it is not clear what the mercurial Jammeh expects to obtain from his courting of Chavez and Ahmadinejad; we will look for opportunities to probe in planned meetings with the GOTG. END SUMMARY

EXPANDING TIES WITH VENEZUELA

¶2. (U) Gambian President Yahya Jammeh visited Venezuela and Cuba May 6-11, using the trip to continue his courtship of Venezuelan leader Chavez while also demonstrating good will toward the Cuban leadership in light of the latter's health-related assistance to this country. Judging from media accounts, most of the substance in Jammeh's trip occurred in Venezuela, where the two sides reportedly signed a dozen specific economic and other agreements under the previously concluded umbrella "framework agreement on cooperation" (reftel). The areas covered by the agreements ranged from energy to health to tourism and cultural affairs.

¶3. (C) According to a knowledgeable journalistic source, Jammeh's major achievement during his Venezuelan sojourn -- given no publicity -- was to secure a \$30 million grant from Chavez. Our source, citing a member of Jammeh's delegation, told Ambassador that Chavez also agreed to provide an unknown amount of oil-related assistance. Our contact said that the Gambian President, in making a pitch for aid, argued that he needed resources for development projects because the U.S. had "abandoned" The Gambia and pointed to our suspension of The Gambia's MCA eligibility. According to our source,

Jammeh further complained -- disingenuously -- to Chavez that the U.S. had acted against The Gambia in retaliation for Jammeh's decision to invite Chavez to the GOTG-hosted African Union Summit in July 2006. (COMMENT: In fact, the decision to suspend The Gambia was based on slippage in the GOTG's performance MCA eligibility criteria, and it was Jammeh who retaliated by subsequently inviting the Venezuelan (and Iranian) leaders to the Summit. END COMMENT)

¶ 14. (C) Our source further stated that Jammeh had presented himself to Chavez as the latter's firm ally in Africa and had indicated a willingness to arrange special concessions for Venezuelan investors here. According to our source, the two sides agreed to establish resident embassies in their respective capitals. (NOTE: At present, the Venezuelan Embassy in Dakar covers The Gambia, while the Gambian Embassy in Washington is responsible for Venezuela. END COMMENT)

CUBAN VISIT

¶ 15. (SBU) We are told that Jammeh's visit to Cuba produced no new agreements, but was designed to convey appreciation for Cuba's long-standing assistance to The Gambia in the medical field. (NOTE: Cuba supplies the majority of physicians and other health workers in The Gambia. END NOTE) We gather from Cuban media coverage that the centerpiece of the visit was Jammeh's meeting with Raul Castro; it is not clear whether he met with Fidel.

JAMMEH'S UPBEAT PRONOUNCEMENTS

¶ 16. (C) The local media gave minimal coverage to Jammeh's public statements in Venezuela and Cuba, and we gather from what we have seen of Venezuelan and Cuban coverage that he was content to let his hosts do most of the talking.

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However, on his return, Jammeh made clear his satisfaction with his trip, describing it as "one of the best I have ever made overseas" and portrayed the new agreements with Venezuela as "among the most comprehensive the Gambia has signed with any country." Turning to Cuba, he expressed solidarity with the ailing Fidel and the Cuban people, while lavishly praising Cuban medical assistance. He went on to pay tribute to Cuba for contributing "human resources" for the "liberation of Africa." While not mentioning the U.S. or West by name, Jammeh took a clear, customary swipe with his assertion that "we will never abandon our friends, no matter who doesn't like what we do; we are an independent country and we are independent enough to make friends where we like, when we like it and how we like it."

COMMENT

¶ 17. (C) Jammeh's visit to Venezuela, coupled with his exchange of visits last December/January with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, underscores the development of the Gambian leader's personal contacts with Chavez and Ahmadinejad since their attendance at the July 2006 AU Summit here. As we have previously reported (reftel), the ongoing expansion of The Gambia's Venezuelan and Iranian connections in past months warrants close monitoring and casts doubt on the mercurial, rough-hewn Jammeh's reliability as a partner. So far, our cooperation with the Gambians in key areas of U.S. interest -- first and foremost, counter-terrorism -- remains intact, and it is not clear just how enthusiastic other senior GOTG officials are about their leader's overtures to Chavez and Ahmadinejad. Nor is it clear what Jammeh expects to gain from his courting of the pair, beyond financial aid and photo ops. We will look for opportunities to probe in planned meetings with officials. END COMMENT

STAFFORD